

Chapter 6

*Buddhism and Caste*¹

This story, part of the Buddhist canon that was written between one hundred and four hundred years after his death, tells of a confrontation between the Buddha and Brahmins, members of the Hindu priestly caste. This encounter would have been common.

1. Why would it be important?
 2. How would you expect most Brahmins to react to the Buddha's opposition to caste?
 3. Would some Brahmins be persuaded by the Buddha's arguments?
 4. How and why would the appeal of Buddhism be more universal than Hinduism?
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Once when the Lord was staying at Savatthi there were five hundred brahmins from various countries in the city . . . and they thought: "This ascetic Gautama preaches that all four classes are pure. Who can refute him?"

At that time there was a young brahmin named Assalayana in the city ... a youth of sixteen, thoroughly versed in the Vedas ... and in all brahminic learning. "He can do it!" thought the brahmins, and so they asked him to try; surrounded by a crowd of brahmins, he went to the Lord, and, after greeting him, sat down and said:

"Brahmins maintain that only they are the highest class, and the others are below them. They are white, the others black; only they are pure, and not the others. Only they are the true sons of Brahma, born from his mouth, born of Brahma, creations of Brahma, heirs of Brahma. Now what does the worthy Gautama say to that?"

"Do the brahmins really maintain this, Assalayana, when they're born of women just like anyone else, of brahmin women who have their periods and conceive, give birth and nurse their children, just like any other women?"

"For all you say, this is what they think "

"Have you ever heard that in the lands of the Greeks and Kambojas and other peoples on the borders there are only two classes, masters and slaves, and a master can become a slave and vice versa?"

"Yes, I've heard so."

"And what strength or support does that fact give to the brahmins' claim?"

"Nevertheless, that is what they think."

"Again if a man is a murderer, a thief, or an adulterer, or commits other grave sins, when his body breaks up on death does he pass on to purgatory if he's a kshatriya,² vaishya,³ or shudra,⁴ but not if he's a brahmin?"

¹ *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, and Japan*, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York: Random House, 1969), 49-51

² Kuh SHAH tree uh – warrior. [Ed.]

1 "No, Gautama. In such a case the same fate is in store for all men, whatever their class."

2 "And if he avoids grave sin, will he go to heaven if he's a brahman, but not if he's a man of the
3 lower classes?"

4 "No, Gautama. In such a case the same reward awaits all men, whatever their class."

5 "And is a brahman capable of developing a mind of love without hate or ill-will, but not a man of
6 the other classes?"

7 "No, Gautama. All four classes are capable of doing so."

8 "Can only a brahman go down to a river and wash away dust and dirt, and not men of the other
9 classes?"

10 "No, Gautama, all four classes can."

11 "Now suppose a king were to gather together a hundred men of different classes and to order the
12 brahmans and kshatriyas to take kindling wood of sal, pine, lotus, or sandal, and light fires, while the low-
13 class folk did the same with common wood. What do you think would happen? Would the fires of the
14 high-born men blaze up brightly ... and those of the humble fail?"

15 "No, Gautama. It would be alike with high and lowly Every fire would blaze with the same
16 bright flame."

17 "Suppose there are two young brahman brothers, one a scholar and the other uneducated. Which
18 of them would be served first at memorial feasts, festivals, and sacrifices, or when entertained as guests?"

19 "The scholar, of course; for what great benefit would accrue from entertaining the uneducated
20 one?"

21 "But suppose the scholar is ill-behaved and wicked, while the uneducated one is well-behaved
22 and virtuous?"

23 "Then the uneducated one would be served first, for what great benefit would accrue from
24 entertaining an ill-behaved and wicked man?"

25 "First, Assalayana, you based your claim on birth, then you gave up birth for learning, and finally
26 you have come round to my way of thinking, that all four classes are equally pure!"

27 At this Assalayana sat silent ... his shoulders hunched, his eyes cast down, thoughtful in mind,
28 and with no answer at hand.

³ VAH eesh uh – Free peasant, artisan, or producer. [Ed.]

⁴ SHOO druh – serf. [Ed.]